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ABSTRACT

This resource booklet addresses adults' concerns about developing appropriate responses to "superhero play" among young children. In order for adults to successfully change patterns of superhero play, it is suggested that they first become familiar with superhero programs and understand the basis of their appeal. The issue discusses superheroes and the culture of childhood, examines children's fascination with superhero cartoons and play, and looks at the nature of children's play as it relates to television superhero cartoons. Why children play superheroes, and the benefits they derive from this type of play, are also discussed. Some common factors of superhero play are identified, including who is involved, where and when this type of play occurs, and what the characteristics are of this type of play. The last section looks at the three basic modes of adult response to superhero play (banning, replacement, and extension), and recommends the strategy of "playscript replacement." Using this strategy, adults teach and encourage alternative activities that meet the same needs as superhero play in ways that children find attractive. The issue also contains a checklist of adult concerns and a number of forms for adults to record their observations of superhero programs and play. Contains nine references. (AS)

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SOCIALISING THE SUPERHEROES

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SOCIALISING THE SUPERHEROES

By
C. GLENN CUPIT

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The author wishes to thank staff of the de Lissa Institute for their helpful comments on the draft manuscript, and Gwen Bruer and the children of Campbelltown Preschool Centre (S.A.) for being superheroes.

SUPERHEROES AND THE CULTURE OF CHILDHOOD

Superhero cartoons have an irresistible fascination for children. We need to understand why. 'Superhero' is shorthand for diverse cartoon characters with shared features. They inhabit worlds where unusual events are commonplace, far removed from children's mundane experience. The stories therefore excite without threatening. Except for feelings of wrath or competitiveness, superheroes remain emotionally detached from even the most horrific events. Some may, however, indulge in sentimentality at times. They always know what to do even when confronted with the bizarre. All possess a peculiar quality which separates them from ordinary, fragile humanity. They may metamorphose into a superior form, suddenly reveal an invincible weapon or skill or trick, or simply work magic. They are carefully identified with the children's 'side': the story is told from their perspective; they may have child companions they protect; they may be placed in idealised family settings; their opponents are usually grotesques, frequently with non-Western characteristics. Superhero adventures follow highly predictable formulas to the extent of repeating identical sequences in every episode. Victory is almost invariably attained through the exercise of superior violence.

Their appeal to young children is mainly based upon the ease with which they can be understood. Despite appearances, their actual pace is slow, usually well within the young child's ability to process the images. This is accomplished by: plots with few distinct elements; very static animation with minimal background detail and characters who remain stationary on the screen even when apparently moving; reinforcement of the visual image by having characters say what they are doing; and high levels of repetition in the images, language, characterisation and narrative. Subtlety is carefully avoided and characters seldom say anything inconsistent with the few basic plot and character features.

Superheroes are designed as identity figures for children attracted to the idea of having a special ability that makes them competent in all the changing confusion of life. This is strongly reinforced by clever merchandising which uses toys designed for group play to create powerful peer group pressure. Programs teach how the characters interact, and this is supported by instructions that come with the toys. If they are to play properly they have to stick within very rigid limits, whether they are being, or working, a particular superhero.

If adults want to intervene and change patterns of superhero play, they must be familiar with the programs and understand the basis of their appeal. We must watch them. To be aware of popular television story forms children watch is as important as being acquainted with the books children read. Before reading further, you may wish to carry out the following observation of current superhero programs. Otherwise you may move on to 'Concerns about superhero play' but you should return to this task before you start to consider any response to the issue of superhero play.

PROFORMA FOR OBSERVATION 1

Important features of current superhero programs

Choose a selection of superhero cartoons to watch. (Your children can tell you their favourites, though they may not understand what you mean by 'superhero'.) As you watch each, fill out a form like the one below. Try to watch a number of examples of each title.

1. Program .....
2. Character: name and role (e.g. leader, victim, follower, chief villain, henchman)

   ....

   ....

   ....

   ....
3. Comments on artwork/script

   .....

   .....

   .....

   .....
4. Plot outline

   Opening situation .....

   Threat .....

   Effect of threat .....

   How threat defeated .....

   Resolution .....
5. Subplots (if present) .....
6. Moral stance/motivation of superhero (either explicit or implicit)

   .....

   .....

   .....

   .....
7. Apparent source of appeal to children

   .....

   .....

   .....

   .....

CONCERNS ABOUT SUPERHERO PLAY

This booklet is written because many adults express concern about this particular form of play. Before reading further, you will find it helpful to identify precisely what it is about superhero play that arouses your concern, by completing the following checklist.

Checklist of adult concerns

Aggression:	the general tenor of the play promotes an aggressive atmosphere
Danger:	children act in ways which increase risk of accidents and injury
Disruption:	other children's play is disturbed or even prevented
Exclusion:	one sex (or other group) is prevented from participating
Imitation:	limits creativity and 'self-generated' play
Noise:	the sound level in the environment becomes excessive
Obsessiveness:	limits children's involvement in other activities
Power:	some children use it to establish dominance over others
Prop:	children use the play to avoid more positive emotional interactions
Rigidity:	play scripts are repeated with minimal variation
Stereotyping:	emphasis on male dominance and strength
Threat:	language use is threatening and abusive
Values:	implicit moral or political education is inappropriate
Violence:	children strike other children in some manner
Other (specify):	.....
Other (specify):	.....
Other (specify):	.....

This checklist is based on inservice seminar discussions with early childhood professionals. They were not unanimous in their concerns, some vigorously debating whether others' concerns were valid. However, there was a general concensus, at least initially, that superhero play was without positive value, was inevitably disruptive and impossible to control. It is easy to understand why they shared this perception but none of the three conclusions is necessarily true.

Superhero play is popular because it meets some needs of the children who involve themselves in it. They, at least, perceive it as having positive value. These may be needs that existing early childhood programs ignore or try to meet in a way that is unfamiliar or less attractive to the children.

Building the *Ghostbusters* Headquarters

Being intrinsically vigorous, superhero play is likely to intrude on quieter activities. Like any vigorous play it needs to be isolated from areas set aside for alternatives and supervised more closely than less physical play. Superhero play is only disruptive when it is allowed to occur without control or it occurs in defiance of some form of prohibition.

Superhero play is not different in kind from other activities children engage in. We cannot afford to be intimidated by the mystique it bears for many because of its instigation by television. We can understand, control and, moreover, use superhero play if we are prepared to identify **why** children engage in it, determine exactly what changes we wish to make in **how** children engage in it and plan programs which recognise its attraction to children and that they **will** engage in it.

PLAY, PLAYSCRIPTS AND TELEVISION

In early childhood education we often talk about 'free play'. The word 'free' is somewhat misleading. Children's play is always shaped by their life experience. Some play is based on direct observation as children reproduce the common happenings of the home and community; playing 'mothers-and-fathers', going for a drive, etc. Some play is based on indirect experience: on ideas derived from adults, other children, reading or watching television. Most play reflects a mixture of both sources of ideas for play.

Play is usually organised into 'scripts' which guide the conduct of the play, particularly where children are playing together. These scripts are mental plans which prescribe the appropriate characters, events, dialogue and sequencing of play episodes. Different scripts underpin 'Going to the beach', 'Doctors and Nurses' and 'Masters of the Universe'.

When scripts are largely based on children's direct observation of life they reflect its diversity, variability and individuality. Scripts based on indirect experience lack this rich source of flexibility. How flexible they remain depends on four factors.

1. The less variety in the material, the more rigid are the playscripts it generates.

2. The more divorced the content is from their everyday life, the less children are able to incorporate diversity from their own direct observation.

3. The more detailed the script provided, the less children have to call upon their own imagination with the variation it provides.

4. The more children share common indirect experiences, the less they need to negotiate individual variations in their scripts.

Even young children watch a lot of television, averaging several hours each day. They often choose to play in front of television, stopping to watch when it catches their attention. Superhero cartoons are a significant part of this diet. Consequently, they have become a major source of playscripts. Television-created scripts tend to be extremely stereotyped and rigid. Many of the stories are far removed from children's everyday life, which makes it difficult for children to vary them on the basis of direct experience. Being visualised, such stories also provide clear instructions on how to play. Often these are supported by associated toys with instructions on the packet which indicate that there is only one right way to play. Finally, as stories are watched by many children, the same script is shared by participants in the play.

We need to look closely at just how our children are playing.

OBSERVATION PROFORMA 2

EVENT SAMPLE OF SOURCE AND FLEXIBILITY OF PLAY SEQUENCES

This proforma is drawn up as a series of cards, or on the separate pages of a small notebook. Keep them with you during your normal interaction with the children. When you notice a play sequence occur quickly complete the front of the card/page. Record an anecdotal description of the event on the reverse side when you have some spare time, but as near to the event as possible. Carried out like this, an event sample minimises the intrusion of observation into your time with the children, but provides the information you need.

Front of card

PLAY SEQUENCES

Observer .....

Date ..... Time .....

Place .....

Likely source of ideas

- ☐ Life experience
- ☐ Other people
- ☐ Books or comics
- ☐ Electronic media
- ☐ Other .....

Children involved

.....

.....

.....

.....

.....

.....

Degree of flexibility

☐ Very High ☐ High ☐ Moderate ☐ Low ☐ Very Low

Reverse side of card

Anecdotal description of play sequence

.....

.....

.....

.....

.....

.....

.....

.....

.....

.....

.....

.....

Summary of Observations

1. **Source of play**

Source	*Frequency*
Life	Count the number of times each source was recorded
People	
Print	
Electronic	

2. **Flexibility of play from different sources**

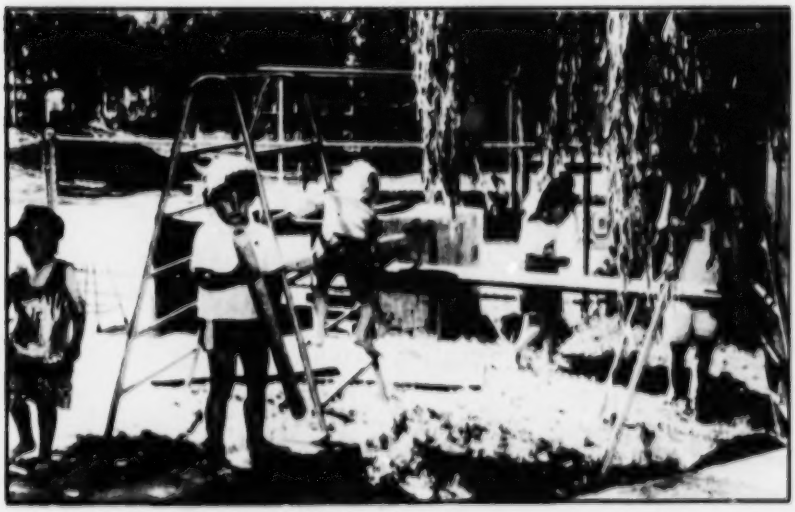
Source	*Flexibility Score*
Life	Score very high as 5, high as 4, etc. and then average
People	the score for each source by dividing the total by the
Print	number of play events based on that source.
Electronic	

3. **Nature of play from different sources**

   Use your anecdotes to write a general intuitive impression of the form of the play derived from each source.

4. **Conclusions**

   Write down what you have learnt from this process. Consider the sources of play ideas, the type of play generated, and any other relevant matters.



Hunting ghosts

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HOW SUPERHERO PLAY OCCURS

Superhero play is not always the same. In discussion, caregivers identify some common factors.

Who is involved?

It is mainly boys who become regularly involved in superhero play. They divide into 'leaders' and 'followers'. Girls who participate are usually assigned a follower role and instructed what to do. Most children join in occasionally, but some do so consistently, particularly those who lead. This latter group is described as small in number, 'unsettled', lacking social skills, finding group entry difficult, devoid of independent creativity, needing 'structure' i.e. detailed direction as to what to do, and suffering from limited language capacities.

> Question: Is there a clue here as to the value it might have for such children?

Where and when does it happen?

Superhero play is mainly conducted outdoors. Isolated events occur indoors, usually in the construction area. Preferred venues are: long flat areas for running; raised areas for jumping and display; and cubby houses for jumping and talking. Children become superheroes when their play is not constrained by adult direction, usually in 'free play' periods. Other 'time' features mentioned are: when a new superhero is screened; when appropriate props come to hand and when challenging alternatives are lacking.

> Question: Are we simply bearing the cost of our own desire to let children play creatively free from adult direction?

What do they do?

Three features are reported: identification displays; unspecific activity; and aggressive acts. Children make and wear superhero gear, predominantly capes and weapons. They strut and show off their muscles. They shout their assumed names. In other words, they try to identify themselves with the character. Followers often mimic the leaders rather than the original character. Children run and jump and shout, sometimes in tight groups. This reproduces much of what happens in the cartoons. As superheroes deviate for no-one, this can be very disruptive of other children's play occurring in the same areas. Participating children pretend-fight, seldom really hurting each other. They may also strike uninvolved children in passing, often harder and sometimes with 'weapons'. One suspects that such children may unwittingly be cast in the role of 'baddies'.

Question:	Can we affirm any positive aspects of such play sequences while discouraging negative aspects?

A general picture emerges. Groups of children lacking creative play skills use outdoor free play periods to run and shout and mimic characters they admire using existing or constructed props as symbolic elements in their play. If we look behind the disruptive surface, there are interesting aspects of construction skills, motor skills and even imagination which are potentially available for development.

OBSERVATION PROFORMA 3
EVENT SAMPLE OF SUPERHERO PLAY

Develop a record of your own experience using an event sample (as described for proforma 2) similar to the example on the next page. The code used is explained below. Space is left to add your own codes.

Areas	Ot: general outdoors	In: general indoors
	Du: dress up	Mo: mound/raised area
	Sp: sand play area	St: cubby house or other structure
	Bp: Block play	Pt: painting
When	At: arrival	Fp: free play
	Sa: special activity	Tu: tidy up/departure
	Mt: 'mat'/story/discussion/songs	
Props	Cp: cape	Cl: other clothing
	Vh: vehicles/box-cars/etc.	Wp: weapons
	Ty: bought toys	
Instigation	Ld: one child	Sg: small group (less than 5)
	Lg: large group (more than 5)	
Termination	Aa: alternative activity intervenes	Ad: other adult intervention
	Ag: children agree to stop	Dr: children drift away
	Ft: ends in a fight	Oc: other children disrupt

SUPERHERO PLAY

Areas	When	Props	Instigation	Termination
Ot ____	At ____	Cp ____	Ld ____	Aa ____
In ____	Fp ____	Ci ____	Sg ____	Ad ____
Bp ____	Mt ____	Ty ____	Lg ____	Ag ____
Du ____	Sa ____	Vh ____	____	Dr ____
Mo ____	Tu ____	Wp ____	____	Ft ____
Pt ____	____	____	____	Oc ____
Sp ____	____	____	____	____
St ____	____	____	____	____
____	____	____	____	____
____	____	____	____	____
____	____	____	____	____
____	____	____	____	____
____	____	____	____	____

Child	Character (eg He-man)	Role in play (eg leader, on sideline)	Action (short anecdote)

Other comments:

WHY CHILDREN PLAY SUPERHEROES

The number of children who engage in superhero play should signal to us that it contains elements of value to them. The absorption of some children should indicate the extent of that value. We will not alter those play patterns until we understand their value. The benefits of such play identified, by teachers somewhat grudgingly, pose some real questions for us.

The most obvious benefit is the enjoyment children find in running, jumping, wrestling, shouting and pretending. It is fun to do such things.

> Question: What outlets do I provide for children to engage in these enjoyable activities?

For children under stress this physical activity, and the aggressive elements of the play, may serve as a release for tensions. The vigorous exercise, and the fantasy, can both distract children from the source of their tension and defuse built up frustrations.

> Question: How do I encourage stressed children to express their tension?

Many children regularly involved in superhero play seem to have language or social difficulties. Superhero play allows for easy participation, achievable success, cheap ego enhancement and accepted ways to exercise leadership. Superhero playscripts are repetitive, simple, and shared by most children, and, therefore, require little negotiation. They are simple both to learn and then to enact. They may be co-operative but, equally, they allow parallel play. Children who find group entry difficult can 'join in' by merely standing on the edges of the group and running when everybody else does. All being superheroes, all win. No child need fear incompetence because the goals are set so low. Each receives a vicarious ego boost by being identified with a popular character. You do not need imagination to persuade others of the worth of your playscript, so the skills required of leaders are minimal.

> Question: Do we provide activities sufficiently undemanding to allow children with limited play and social skills the same sense of participation and success?

Socially-maladept children gain a degree of social acceptance by identifying with other children in shared playscripts. For some, it is an approach to establishing relationships.

> Question: Do we find and foster common ground between children as a way of integrating socially-awkward children into friendship groups?

Some superhero play, usually individual, may be a bid for adult attention, particularly if disapproval has previously been expressed.

Question: Does our attitude to superhero play provide a challenge to some children?

Building the *Ghostmobile*

OBSERVATION TASK

From the results of your avent sample, and other available information, answer the following questions:

1. Which children regularly engage in superhero play? Does how they participate give clues as to why they participate? What else do I know about these children?

2. Under what circumstances does superhero play occur? Does this provide clues as to why it occurs? What circumstances seem to minimise superhero play?

3. What is the normal pattern of superhero play? What clues does this provide about the source of the behaviour? Are there preferable play alternatives which provide the same valued features of superhero play?

RESPONSE TO SUPERHERO PLAY

There are three basic modes of response to superhero play: banning, replacement and extension. Banning seems to be most common and least useful. While meeting some immediate adult needs, it fails to address children's needs reflected in the play and it sets up an ongoing need for enforcement. It might be argued that its best effect is to develop ingenuity in finding ways to play despite the ban.

More valuable is the strategy of playscript replacement. We have to find, teach and encourage activities which meet the same needs as superhero play in ways which the target children find attractive. This may require a high level of adult involvement until children see that our alternatives are actually more fun.

Task 1

Develop an example of a playscript which provides the positive aspects of superhero play without the negative factors identified earlier. Draw up some strategies for introducing this to children and engaging their ongoing participation in it.

Given that children will watch superhero cartoons we must ask what use we can make of them. They can certainly provide a source of discussion. We can help break down the rigidity by 'What would happen if . . . ?' questions. For example, what would Spiderman do if he caught a cold? what would Mask do if one of their cars wouldn't start? If you keep an eye out you will notice episodes which do contain excellent discussion material, for example, a monstrous villain who helps a good monster he loves but then gives her up, because she is good and he can't change.

Superhero stories provide a source of extension activities just as do read stories. For example, Spiderman leads into exploration of spiders, webs, counting (his device has the wrong number of legs), even radiation, if you dare tackle that. Transformers might lead into change, conservation, frogs and butterflies and so on. Of course, this can only occur if you get to know the story well enough to see the extension possibilities.

Task 2

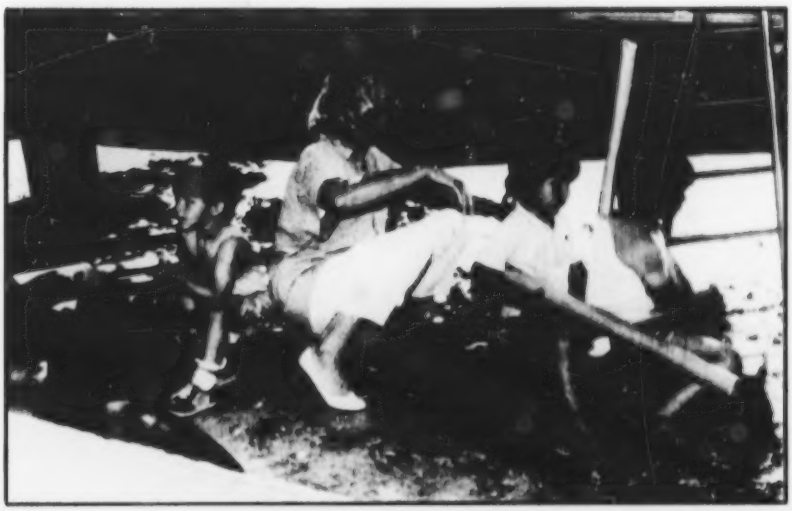
Further analyse one of the superhero cartoons you observed looking for ideas you can use positively with your children. This might be as whole group, small group or individual discussions or activities. Plan ways of using these with your children.

You may also feel the need to counteract some of the values children learn from superhero play. As you can't stop that learning from occurring you may wish to provide some alternative input to act as a balance.

Task 3

From your previous analysis of superhero cartoons identify a value you may wish to counterbalance. Choose, or create, stories or activities which will provide an alternative value base. Plan a strategy to use these with your children.

Like getting children to go to bed, or to eat their vegetables, superhero play is not a problem you will solve once for all. It is one you have to keep working at. However, by determining that you will intervene effectively you transform the 'problem' into an educational challenge and, from there, into a source of growth experiences for children.



Taking teacher *Ghosthunting*

SOME USEFUL READINGS

Braithwaite, V., and Holman, J. (1981) Parent observed behaviours of preschool television viewers. *Australian Journal of Psychology. 33*(3), 375–382.
(Interesting provided you realise parents are not always the best observers of their own children's behaviour.)

Cupit, C.G. (1988) *The child audience: A guide to the developing child for television writers and producers.* Canberra: Australian Government Publishing Service.
(Useful information about the 5–13s though directed to a specific audience.)

Journal of Social Issues (1986) *42*(3), passim.
(Wide ranging review of the issues about violent television.)

Kendall, Alan (1979) The impact of television on the developing child. National Conference of the Australian Preschool Association, Sydney.
(Life from the Playschool perspective. May not be easy to obtain.)

Kostelnik, M.J., Whiren, A.P. and Stein, L.C. (1986) Living with the He-Man: Managing superhero fantasy play. *Young Children.* May, 3–9.
(Good to compare with your own conclusions.)

Palmer, P. (1986) *The lively audience: A study of children around the TV set.* Sydney: Allen & Unwin.
(Interesting though about older children.)

Simpson, P. (ed.) (1987) Parents talking television: Television in the home. London: Comedia.
(Interesting to compare with your own attitudes.)

Singer, Dorothy G. and Singer, Jerome L. (1978) Family television viewing habits and the spontaneous play of preschool children. In M.S. Smart and R.C. Smart (eds.). *Preschool children: Development and relationships.* New York: Macmillan.
(For the slightly broader play context.)

Television Awareness Training Australia (eds.) (1982) *Television: A new look for viewers.* Adelaide: Mediacom.
(A planned way to come to a better understanding of the box.)